

A Buddhist Response to Contemporary Dilemmas of Human Existence

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Abstract

In this essay, presented at an interfaith conference in Sri Lanka, the author describes the "radical secularization" of human life that lies at the root of the manifold social problems in the modern world. Religious fundamentalism and spiritual eclecticism have emerged as two counterproductive reactions to this state of affairs. The author enumerates several fundamental tasks that practitioners from all the world's great religions must undertake as part of a sane response to the current crisis.

Since my presentation is entitled "A Buddhist Response to Contemporary Dilemmas of Human Existence," I should begin by spelling out what I mean by the expression "contemporary dilemmas of human existence." By this phrase I do not refer explicitly to the momentous social and political problems of our time — global poverty, ethnic hostility, overpopulation, the spread of AIDS, the suppression of human rights, environmental despoliation, etc. I recognize fully well that these problems are of major concern to contemporary religion, which has the solemn responsibility of serving as the voice of conscience to the world which is only too prone to forsake all sense of conscience in blind pursuit of self-interest. However, I see many of these particular problems as symptoms or offshoots of a more fundamental dilemma which is essentially spiritual in nature, and it is this I am particularly concerned to address.

Our root problem, it seems to me, is at its core a problem of consciousness. I would characterize this problem briefly as a fundamental existential dislocation, a dislocation having both cognitive and ethical dimensions. That is, it involves both a disorientation in our understanding of reality, and a distortion or inversion of the proper scale of values, the scale that would follow from a correct understanding of reality. Because our root problem is one of consciousness, this means that any viable solution must be framed in terms of a transformation of consciousness. It requires an attempt to arrive at a more accurate grasp of the human situation in its full depth and breadth, and a turning of the mind and heart in a new direction, a direction commensurate with the new understanding, one that brings light and peace rather than strife and distress.

Before I discuss some of the responses that religion might make to the outstanding dilemmas of our age, I propose to offer a critique of the existential dislocation that has spread among such significant portion of humankind today. Through most of this century, the religious point of view has been defensive. It may now be the time to take the offensive, by scrutinizing closely the dominant modes of thought that lie at the base of our spiritual malaise.

I see the problem of existential dislocation to be integrally tied to the ascendancy, world wide, of a type of mentality that originates in the West, but which today has become typical of human civilization as a whole. It would be too simple to describe this frame of mind as materialism: first, because those who adopt it do not invariably subscribe to materialism as a philosophical thesis; and second, because obsession with material progress is not the defining characteristic of this outlook, but a secondary manifestation. If I were to coin a single expression to convey its distinctive essence, I would call it the radical secularization of human life.

1 The Historical Background

The underlying historical cause of this phenomenon seems to lie in an unbalanced development of the human mind in the West, beginning around the time of the European Renaissance. This development gave increasing importance to the rational, manipulative and dominative capacities of the mind at the expense of its intuitive, comprehensive, sympathetic and integrative capacities. The rise to dominance of the rational, manipulative facets of human consciousness led to a fixation upon those aspects of the world that are amenable to control by this type of consciousness — the world that could be conquered, comprehended and exploited in terms of fixed quantitative units. This fixation did not stop merely with the pragmatic efficiency of such a point of view, but became converted into a theoretical standpoint, a standpoint claiming validity. In effect, this means that the material world, as defined by modern science, became the founding stratum of reality, while mechanistic physics,

its methodological counterpart, became a paradigm for understanding all other types of natural phenomena, biological, psychological and social.

The early founders of the Scientific Revolution in the seventeenth century — such as Galileo, Boyle, Descartes and Newton — were deeply religious men, for whom the belief in the wise and benign Creator was the premise behind their investigations into lawfulness of nature. However, while they remained loyal to the theistic premises of Christian faith, the drift of their thought severely attenuated the organic connection between the divine and the natural order, a connection so central to the premodern world view. They retained God only as the remote Creator and law-giver of Nature and sanctioned moral values as the expression of the Divine Will, the laws decreed for man by his Maker. In their thought a sharp dualism emerged between the transcendent sphere and the empirical world. The realm of "hard facts" ultimately consisted of units of senseless matter governed by mechanical laws, while ethics, values and ideals were removed from the realm of facts and assigned to the sphere of an interior subjectivity.

It was only a matter of time until, in the trail of the so-called Enlightenment, a wave of thinkers appeared who overturned the dualistic thesis central to this world view in favor of the straightforward materialism. This development was not a following through of the reductionistic methodology to its final logical consequences. Once sense perception was hailed as the key to knowledge and quantification came to be regarded as the criterion of actuality, the logical next step was to suspend entirely the belief in a supernatural order and all it implied. Hence finally an uncompromising version of mechanistic materialism prevailed, whose axioms became the pillars of the new world view. Matter is now the only ultimate reality, and divine principle of any sort dismissed as sheer imagination.

The triumph of materialism in the sphere of cosmology and metaphysics had the profoundest impact on human self-understanding. The message it conveyed was that the inward dimensions of our existence, with its vast profusion of spiritual and ethical concerns, is mere adventitious superstructure. The inward is reducible to the external, the invisible to the visible, the personal to the impersonal. Mind becomes a higher order function of the brain, the individual a node in a social order governed by statistical laws. All humankind's ideals and values are relegated to the status of illusions: they are projections of biological drives, sublimated wish-fulfillment. Even ethics, the philosophy of moral conduct, comes to be explained away as a flowery way of expressing personal preferences. Its claim to any objective foundation is untenable, and all ethical judgments become equally valid. The ascendancy of relativism is complete.

2 The Secularization of Life

I have sketched the intellectual background to our existential dislocation in a fair degree of detail because I think that any attempt to comprehend the contemporary dilemmas of human existence in isolation from this powerful cognitive underpinning would be incomplete and unsatisfactory. The cognitive should not be equated with the merely theoretical, abstract and ineffectual. For the cognitive can, in subtle ways that defy easy analysis, exercise a tremendous influence upon the affective and practical dimensions of our lives, doing so "behind the back," as it were, of our outwardly directed consciousness. Thus, once the world view which extols the primacy of the external dimension of reality over the internal gained widespread acceptance on the cognitive front, it infiltrated the entire culture, entailing consequences that are intensely practical and personal. Perhaps the most characteristic of these might be summed up in the phrase I used at the outset of this paper: the radical secularization of life. The dominance of materialism in science and philosophical thought penetrated into the religious sphere and sapped religious beliefs and values of their binding claims on the individual in public affairs. These beliefs and values were relegated to the private sphere, as matters of purely personal conscience, while those spheres of life that transcend the narrowly personal were divested of religious significance. Thus in an early stage the evolution of modern society replicated the dualism of philosophical theory: the external sphere becomes entirely secular, while ethical value and spirituality are confined to the internal.

In certain respects this was without doubt a major step in the direction of human liberation, for it freed individuals to follow the dictates of personal conscience and reduced considerably the pressures placed upon them to conform to the prevailing system of religious beliefs. But while this advantage cannot be underestimated, the triumph of secularism in the domain of public life eventually came to throw into question the cogency of any form of religious belief or commitment to a transcendent guarantor of ethical values, and this left the door open for widespread moral deterioration, often in the name of personal freedom.

While a dualistic division of the social order characterized the early phase of the modern period, as in the case of philosophy dualism does not have the last word. For the process of secularization does not respect even the boundaries of the private and personal. Once a secular agenda engulfs the social order, the entire focus of human life shifts from the inward to the outward, and from the Eternal to the Here and Now. Secularization invades the most sensitively private arenas of our lives, spurred on by a social order driven by the urge for power, profits and uniformity. Our lives become devoured by temporal, mundane preoccupations even to the extent that such notions as redemption, enlightenment and deliverance — the watchwords of spirituality — at

best serve as evokers of a sentimental piety. The dominant ends of secular society create a situation in which any boundary line of inward privacy comes to be treated as a barrier that must be surmounted. Hence we find that commercial interests and political organizations are prepared to explore and exploit the most personal frontiers of desire and fantasy in order to secure their advantage and enhance their wealth and power.

The ascendancy of secularization in human life in no way means that most people in secular society openly reject religion and acknowledge the finality of this-worldly aims. Far from it. The human mind displays an astounding ability to operate simultaneously on different levels, even when those levels are sustained by opposing principles. Thus in a given culture the vast majority will still pay homage to God or to the Dhamma; they will attend church or the temple; they will express admiration of religious ideals; they will conform to the routine observances expected of them by their ancestral faith. Appeals to religious sentiment will be a powerful means of stirring up waves of emotion and declarations of loyalty, even of mobilizing whole sections of the population in support of sectarian stands on volatile issues. This affirmation of allegiance to religious ideals is not done out of sheer hypocrisy, but from a capacity for inward ambivalence that allows us to live in a state of self-contradiction. People in secular society will genuinely profess reverence for religion, will vigorously affirm religious beliefs. But their real interests lie elsewhere, riveted tightly to the temporal. The ruling motives of human life are no longer purification but production, no longer the cultivation of character but the consumption of commodities and the enjoyment of sense pleasures. Religion may be permitted to linger at the margins of the mind, indeed may even be invited into the inward chamber, so long as it does not rudely demand of us that we take up any crosses.

This existential dislocation has major repercussions on a variety of fronts. Most alarming, in its immediate impact on our lives, is the decline in the efficacy of time-honored moral principles as guides to conduct. I do not propose painting our picture of the past in rosy colors. Human nature has never been especially sweet, and the books of history speak too loudly of man's greed, blindness and brutality. Often, I must sadly add, organized religion has been among the worst offenders. However, while aware of this, I would also say that at least during certain past epochs our ancestors esteemed ethical ideals as worthy of emulation and sanctioned moral codes as the proper guidelines of life. For all its historical shortcomings, religion did provide countless people in any given culture with a sense of meaning to their existence, a sense that their lives were rooted in the Ultimate Reality and were directed towards that Reality as their final goal. Now, however, that we have made the radical turn away from the Transcendent, we have lost the polestar that guided our daily choices and decisions. The result is evident in the moral degeneration that proliferates at a frightening rate through every so-called civilized part of the world. In the self-styled Developed World the cities have become urban jungles; the use of liquor and drugs spreads as an easy escape route from anxiety and despair; sexually provocative entertainment takes on more and more degrading forms; the culture of the gun hooks even middle-class youths itching to break the tedium of their lives with murder and mayhem. Most lamentably, the family has lost its crucial function of serving as the training ground where children learn decency and personal responsibility. Instead it has become merely a convenient and fragile arrangement for the personal gratification of its members, who too often seek their gratification at the expense of each other. While such trends have not yet widely inundated Sri Lanka, we can already see their germs beginning to sprout, and as modernization spreads extraordinary vigilance will be required to withstand them.

3 The Religious Dimension

As humanity moves ever closer to the 21st century, the existential rift at the heart of our inner life remains. Its pain is exacerbated by our repeated failures to solve so many of the social, political and economic problems that seem on the surface as though they should be easily manageable by our sophisticated technological capabilities. The stubborn persistence of these problems — and the constant emergence of new problems as soon as the old ones recede — seems to make a mockery of all our well-intentioned attempts to establish a utopian paradise on utterly secular premises.

I certainly do not think that the rediscovery of the religious consciousness is in itself a sufficient remedy for these problems which spring from a wide multiplicity of causes far too complex to be reduced to any simplistic explanation. But I do believe that the religious crisis of modern humanity is intimately connected to these diverse social and political tragedies at many levels. Some of these levels, I would add, lie far beyond the range of rational comprehension and defy analysis in terms of linear causality. I would see the connection as that of co-arisen manifestations of a corrosive sickness in the human soul — the sickness of selfishness and craving — or as karmic backlashes of the three root defilements pinpointed by Buddhism — greed, hatred and delusion — which have become so rampant today. I therefore think that any hopes we may cherish towards healing our community, our planet and our world must involve us in a deep level process of healing ourselves. And since this healing, in my view, can only be successfully accomplished by re-orienting our lives towards the Ultimate Reality and Supreme Good, the process of healing necessarily takes on a religious dimension.

It is hardly within my capacity as a very limited individual to delineate, in this paper, all the elements that would be required to restore the religious dimension to its proper role in human life. But I will first briefly

mention two religious approaches that have sprung up in response to our existential dislocation, but which I consider to be inadequate, even false by-paths. Then I will sketch, in a tentative and exploratory manner, several responses religion must make if it is to answer the deep yearnings that stir in the hearts of present-day humanity.

The two religious phenomena that in my view are false detours which must finally be rejected are fundamentalism and spiritual eclecticism. Both have arisen as reactions to the pervasive secularism of our time; both speak to the widespread hunger for more authentic spiritual values than our commercial, sensualist culture can offer. Yet neither, I would argue, provides a satisfactory solution to our needs.

Fundamentalism no doubt bears the character of a religious revival. However, in my opinion it fails to qualify as a genuinely spiritual type of religiosity because it does not meet the criterion of true spirituality. This criterion I would describe, in broad terms, as the quest to transcend the limitations of the ego-consciousness. As I understand fundamentalism, it draws its strength from its appeal to human weakness, by provoking the ego-consciousness and the narrow, volatile interests of the small self. Its psychological mood is that of dogmatism; it polarizes the human community into the opposed camps of insiders and outsiders; it dictates a policy of aggression that entails either violence against the outsiders or attempts to proselytize them. It does not point us in the direction of selflessness, understanding, acceptance of others based on love, the ingredients of true spirituality.

Spiritual eclecticism — omnipresent in the West today — is governed by the opposite logic. It aims to amalgamate, to draw into a whole a sundry variety of quasi-religious disciplines: yoga, spiritualism, channeling, astrology, faith healing, meditation, I Ching, special diets, Cabbala, etc. These are all offered to the seeker on a pick-and-choose basis; everything is valid, anything goes. This eclecticism often reveals a longing for genuine spiritual experience, for a vision of reality more encompassing than pragmatic materialism. It fails because it tears profound disciplines out from their context in a living faith and blends them together into a shapeless mixture without spine or substance. Its psychological mood is that of a romantic, promiscuous yearning for easy gratification rather than that of serious commitment. Owing to its lack of discrimination it often shades off into the narcissistic and the occult, occasionally into the diabolical.

I believe that a viable solution to humanity's spiritual hunger can arise only from within the fold of the great classical religious traditions. I must also state frankly that I am convinced that the religious tradition that best addresses the crucial existential problems of our time is Buddhism, especially in its early form based on the Pali canon. However, to speak in terms of a more general application, I would maintain that if any great religion is to acquire a new relevance it must negotiate some very delicate, very difficult balances. It must strike a happy balance between remaining faithful to the seminal insights of its Founder and ancient masters and acquiring the skill and flexibility to formulate these insights in ways that directly link up with the pressing existential demands of old-age. It is only too easy to veer towards one of these extremes at the expense of the other: either to adhere tenaciously to ancient formulas at the expense of present relevance, or to bend fundamental principles so freely that one drains them of their deep spiritual vitality. The middle way, which fuses fidelity to tradition and relevance to contemporary concerns, is always the most difficult. Above all, I think any religion today must bear in mind an important lesson impressed on us so painfully by past history: the task of religion is to liberate, not to enslave. Its purpose should be to enable its adherents to move towards the realization of the Ultimate Good and to bring the power of this realization to bear upon life in the world. The purpose is not to subordinate the individual to the institution, to multiply the numbers of the faithful, and to sacrifice the individual conscience upon the altar of the Establishment.

Despite the vast differences between the belief systems of the major religions, I think there are vitally important areas of common concern which unite them in this Age of Confusion. With the world torn between senseless violence and vulgar frivolity, it is critically necessary that representatives of the great religions meet to exchange insights and to seek to understand each other more deeply. Cooperation between the great religions is certainly necessary if they are to contribute a meaningful voice towards the solution of the momentous spiritual dilemmas that confront us.

4 The Tasks of Religion Today

Here I will mention several challenges that confront the major religious traditions today, and I will also sketch, very briefly, the ways such challenges may be met from within the horizons of the religion which I follow, Theravada Buddhism. I leave it to the Christian scholars involved in this dialogue to decide for themselves whether these points are of sufficient gravity to merit their own attention and to work out solutions from the perspective of their own faith.

4.1 The Philosophical Bridge

The first challenge I will discuss is primarily philosophical in scope, though with profound and far-reaching practical implications. This is the task of overcoming the fundamental dichotomy which scientific materialism has posited between the realm of "real fact," i.e., impersonal physical processes, and the realm of value. By assigning value and spiritual ideals to private subjectivity, the materialistic world view, as I mentioned earlier, threatens to undermine any secure objective foundation for morality. The result is the widespread moral degeneration that we witness today. To counter this tendency, I do not think mere moral exhortation is sufficient. If morality is to function as an efficient guide to conduct, it cannot be propounded as a self-justifying scheme but must be embedded in a more comprehensive spiritual system which grounds morality in a transpersonal order. Religion must affirm, in the clearest terms, that morality and ethical values are not mere decorative frills of personal opinion, not subjective superstructure, but intrinsic laws of the cosmos built into the heart of reality.

In the Buddha's teaching, the objective foundation for morality is the law of kamma, and its corollary, the teaching of rebirth. According to the principle of kamma, our intentional actions have a built-in potential for generating consequences for ourselves that correspond to the moral quality of the deeds. Our deeds come to fruition, sometimes in this life, sometimes in future lives, but in either case an inescapable, impersonal law connects our actions to their fruits, which rebound upon us exactly in the way we deserve. Thus our morally determinate actions are the building blocks of our destiny: we must ultimately reap the fruits of our own deeds, and by our moral choices and values we construct our happiness and suffering in this life and in future lives.

In the Buddha's teaching, the law of kamma is integral to the very dynamics of the universe. The Buddhist texts speak of five systems of cosmic law, each perfectly valid within its own domain: the laws of inorganic matter (*utuniyama*), the laws of living organisms (*bijaniyama*), the laws of consciousness (*cittaniyama*), the laws of kamma or moral deeds and their fruits (*kammaniyama*), and the laws of spiritual development (*dharmataniyama*). The science that dominates the West has flourished through its exclusive attention to the first two systems of law. As a Buddhist, I would argue that a complete picture of actuality must take account of all five orders, and that by arriving at such a complete picture, we can restore moral and spiritual values to their proper place within the whole.

4.2 Guidelines to Conduct

A second challenge, closely related to the first, is to propose concrete guidelines to right conduct capable of lifting us from our morass of moral confusion. While the first project I mentioned operates on the theoretical front, this one is more immediately practical in scope. Here we are not so much concerned with establishing a valid foundation for morality as with determining exactly what guidelines to conduct are capable of promoting harmonious and peaceful relations between people. On this front I think that the unsurpassed guide to the ethical good is still the Five Precepts (*pancasila*) taught by Buddhism. According to the Buddhist texts, these precepts are not unique to the Buddha Sasana but constitute the universal principles of morality upheld in every culture dedicated to virtue. The Five Precepts can be considered in terms of both the actions they prohibit and the virtues they inculcate. At the present time I think it is necessary to place equal stress on both aspects of the precepts, as the Buddha himself has done in the Suttas.

These precepts are:

1. The rule to abstain from taking life, which implies the virtue of treating all beings with kindness and compassion.
2. The rule to abstain from stealing, which implies honesty, respect for the possessions of others, and concern for the natural environment.
3. The rule to abstain from sexual misconduct, which implies responsibility and commitment in one's marital and other interpersonal relationships.
4. The rule to abstain from lying, which implies a commitment to truth in dealing with others.
5. The rule to abstain from alcoholic drinks, drugs and intoxicants, which implies the virtues of sobriety and heedfulness.

In presenting the case for these precepts, it should be shown that quite apart from their long-term karmic effect, which is a matter of faith, they conduce to peace and happiness for oneself right here and now, as well as towards the welfare of those whom one's actions affect.

4.3 Diagnosis of the Human Condition

A third project for religion is to formulate, on the basis of its fundamental doctrinal traditions, an incisive diagnosis of the contemporary human condition. From the Buddhist perspective I think the analysis that the Buddha offered in his Four Noble Truths still remains perfectly valid. Not only does it need not the least revision or reinterpretation, but the course of twenty-five centuries of world history and the present-day human situation only underscores its astuteness and relevance.

The core problem of human existence, the First Truth announces, is suffering. The canonical texts enumerate different types of suffering — physical, psychological and spiritual; in the present age, we should also highlight the enormous volume of social suffering that plagues vulnerable humanity. The cause of suffering, according to the Second Truth, lies nowhere else than in our own minds — in our craving and ignorance, in the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion. The solution to the problem is the subject of the Third Noble Truth, which states that liberation from suffering must also be effected by the mind, through the eradication of the defilements responsible for suffering. And the Fourth Truth gives us the method to eradicate the defilements, the Noble Eightfold Path, with its three stages of training in moral discipline, meditation and wisdom.

4.4 A Practical Method of Training

The next point is a practical extension of the third. Once a religion has offered us a diagnosis of the human condition which reveals the source of suffering in the mind, it must offer us concrete guidance in the task of training and mastering the mind. Thus I think that a major focus of present-day religion must be the understanding and transformation of the mind. This requires experiential disciplines by which we can arrive at deeper insight into ourselves and gradually effect very fundamental inward changes. Buddhism provides a vast arsenal of time-tested teachings and methods for meeting this challenge. It contains comprehensive systems of psychological analysis and potent techniques of meditation that can generate experiential confirmation of its principles.

In the present age access to these teachings and practices will cease to remain the exclusive preserve of the monastic order, but will spread to the lay community as well, as has already been occurring throughout the Buddhist world both in the East and in the West. The spirit of democracy and the triumph of the experimental method demand that the means of mind-development be available to anyone who is willing to make the effort. The experiential dimension of religion is an area where Christianity can learn a great deal from Buddhism, and I believe that Christianity must rediscover its own contemplative heritage and make available deeper transformative disciplines to both its clergy and its lay followers if it is to retain its relevance to humanity in the future.

4.5 The Preservation of the Human Community

The last challenge I will discuss is the need for religions to re-affirm and to actively demonstrate those values that are particularly critical for the human race to attain the status of an integrative, harmonious community. They must translate into concrete programs of action the great virtues of love and compassion. Because the world has become more closely knit than ever before, we have to recognize the enormous responsibility that we each bear for the welfare of the whole. What all religions need to stress, in the face of so much cruelty and violence, is the development of a sense of global responsibility, a concern for the welfare and happiness of all living beings as well as for the protection of our natural environment. Love and compassion must issue forth in active endeavor to alleviate the sufferings of others and to ensure that the oppressed and afflicted are granted all the opportunities that have hitherto been denied them.

This is an area where Christianity, with its Social Gospel, has shown far greater initiative than Buddhism, which too often has subscribed to a false, fatalistic interpretation of the karma doctrine that stifles social action. But the foundation for a socially oriented expression of Buddhism is already found in the Dhamma, especially in its formula of the four Brahma Viharas, or "Divine Abodes," as the ideal social virtues: loving kindness towards all beings, compassion for those who suffer, altruistic joy for those who are well, and equanimity as freedom from arbitrary discrimination. Already a socially engaged form of Buddhism has emerged and no doubt it will become an important development in the future of the religion.

I wish to conclude this talk by drawing attention to the fact that religion today has two crucial tasks to accomplish in responding to the vital problems of our time. One is to help the individual fathom the ultimate truth about his or her own personal existence, to move in the direction of the Ultimate Good, the Unconditioned Reality, wherein true liberation is to be found. The other task is to address the problem of the Manifest Good: the problem of the human community, of promoting peace, harmony and fellowship. The urgency of combining these two tasks was beautifully summed up by the Buddha in a short discourse in the Satipatthana Samyutta. There the Blessed One said:

Protecting oneself, one protects others, protecting others, one protects oneself.

He then explains that the expression "protecting oneself, one protects others" refers to the practice of meditation, which purifies the mind of its defilements and gives insight into the real nature of the world. By "protecting others, one protects oneself" he means the development of the virtues of patience, loving kindness and compassion, by which one safeguards others from harm and suffering. I believe that a commitment to these two great principles — *pañña* and *karuna* in Buddhist terms, gnosis and love in Christian terms — is essential if religion today is to guide humanity from the brink of darkness and despair to the realm of spiritual light and freedom.

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